



March 11, 2021

(Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program) - FAVORABLE

Chair Shane Pendergrass
Health and Government Operations Committee
Room 241, House Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Chair Pendergrass and House Health and Government Operations Committee Members,

BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites supports *HB396 - Public Health - Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program*. This bill will allow community-based organizations, such our trained membership of over 100 advocates, to establish overdose prevention programs to reduce overdose deaths, which continue to occur at unprecedented levels in Maryland.

Founded in March 2017, BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites is a statewide Baltimore-based advocacy coalition working to end overdose and criminalization by promoting safe spaces, dignity, health, and justice for people who use drugs. BRIDGES was founded with funding from the Drug Policy Alliance and Open Society Foundations, international resources for drug policy reform and reparative justice for communities harmed by the war on drugs. Our coalition was created to address needs named by Maryland policymakers during committee hearings and delegation meetings in 2016, when then-Delegate Dan Morhaim first presented this bill to authorize OPS.

Since the inception of BRIDGES in March 2017, our statewide coalition's purpose is to strengthen community buy-in for overdose prevention sites (OPS). Comprised of 30 organizational members dedicated to advocate for Maryland State authorization of OPS, we have led public education and community mobilization efforts via: monthly community organizing meetings, mock demonstrations of OPS, community dialogues, informational hearings with Baltimore City Council, online messaging campaigns, an [educational video series](#), focus groups, surveys with various stakeholders, and seven Maryland General Assembly committee hearings. For four years, we have engaged in well over 3,000 conversations and more than a dozen public events hosted by places of worship, treatment programs, neighborhood associations, and public officials -- all with the same goal of addressing potential community concerns around overdose prevention sites being set up around the state.

Maryland needs Overdose Prevention Sites; indoor spaces where individuals can consume their own drugs in the presence of trained professionals with immediate access to life-saving interventions, medical care, emotional support, and non-judgmental therapeutic relationships.

We recognize that OPS are not the sole solution to the overdose epidemic and could never replace treatment services. OPS are a crisis intervention positioned within the continuum of care to reduce overdose rates. To most effectively save lives from the growing overdose epidemic, Marylanders need and deserve overdose prevention sites that are community and peer-run, grounded in mutual aid efforts, and implemented with a social justice framework.

For over 30 years, it has been proven globally that overdose prevention sites save lives. In all 150+ OPS around the world, in which millions of supervised drug injections have occurred, no one has died of a fatal overdose. We urge the General Assembly to authorize the proposed Overdose and Infectious Disease Prevention Services Program, which mirrors these programs already established across the world.

We ask that the House Health and Government Operations Committee give HB396 a favorable report.

For more information about the BRIDGES Coalition for Overdose Prevention Sites, please contact Rajani Gudlavalleti at rajani@baltimoreharmreduction.org.

